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Diving In Chain Mail

Michael Ramer is 17 years old and he is about to do something that practically no one in the world has done, let alone many 17 year olds. Michael is donning a chain mail dive suit and getting ready to jump into the ocean off Port Lucaya, Grand Bahama. Michael is learning to feed sharks as part of his High School senior project.

At one point Michael looks up and says, "Am I really going to go down and feed sharks in the open ocean."

As Michael gets dressed, his mother, Brenda, looks at me and says, "Am I a bad mom?" I reassure her that she is, in fact, a terrific mom because she is allowing her son to do something he is so clearly excited about – something he will cherish forever.

I can confidently reassure Brenda of her fine motherhood because of the diminutive woman quietly coaching Michael as he dons his chain mail. She is the woman who will stand next to Michael as he waves small fish in the water in front of hungry Caribbean reef and nurse sharks. She is the teacher, shark

PELICAN BAY

GRAND BAHAMA



researcher and one of only a handful of shark feeder instructors in the world. She is Cristina Zenato.

Diving Dynamo

To follow Cristina Zenato around for a few days is to ignore pretty much everything we all understand about diving protocol. She dives more and in more varied environments in a week than most divers dive in a year. And she never slows down –never.

As Michael Ramer prepares for his first shark feed, Cristina quietly offers encouragement and coaching. Her confidence is remarkable and she instills that confidence in Michael and others around her. And confidence is important when you are about to jump into shark infested water with a container of fish and hand feed the ocean's apex predators?

The Bahamas is experiencing a cold snap, much colder than most locals can remember. People are walking around Port Lucaya in parkas and the wind whipping around the buildings makes it feel more like the Northeast US where I live than a tropical island.

One local told me, "This is the coldest I have ever been."

The cold wind and choppy water make for a less than comfortable dive boat but everyone is focused on Michael and getting in the water for the feeding. Someone quips, "I can't wait to jump in so I can warm up."

Cristina is clad in dive gear and a huge parka to ward off the wind. She is giving Michael final pointers on keeping every possible inch of his tall athletic frame protected by the tightly woven chain mail sharksuits made by Neptunic. There is a final gear check; Michael hugs Brenda and then giant strides all around.

I pop my Apeks GTX100 second stage regulator into my mouth and follow the shark feeding team into the water, noting in my mind that I'm the only diver not wearing a Neptunic Sharksuit.

Cristina is clearly in charge as she and photographer Eddy Raphael descend to the staging area with Michael. They carry a specially designed tube containing the small fish that will be shark lunch today. This is a delicate

time in the shark feeding course because if a diver is going to panic, this is when it is likely to happen.

The shark feeders begin their walk across the bottom to the feeding area. They move deliberately, Cristina offering Michael encouraging signals as Eddy snaps photo after photo.

And then the sharks come.

Romantic Childhood

Cristina was born in Italy in 1971 but grew up in a rain forest in the Congo on the African Continent until she was 15. Living in Africa gave her a great love for the outdoors and outdoor activity. She is an avid biker and it's clear at even the first blush that Cristina would rather be outside and active than anything else.

At 22 she moved to the Bahamas and learned to scuba dive, that was 1994. By 1995 she was an instructor and shark diver. A year later, she was feeding sharks and was full a full cave certified diver.

Cristina is now the diving supervisor at UNEXSO, the Underwater Explorers Society (www.unexso.com) and the first dedicated diving resort in the world. She has held that position for 15 years, an incredible tenure in the diving industry. In addition to running all of UNEXSO's dive operations and teaching shark feeding, Cristina is one of the few cave diving instructors in the Bahamas.

Her Bahamas Diving Mentor is Ben Rose, the legendary diver and explorer. During a chance meeting with Rose at a cavern he discovered appropriately called "Ben's Cavern," the clear affection between the two is apparent.

Cristina speaks with an elegant, exotic Italian accent – and with her hands. She describes her days, "I'm directing an orchestra –especially when I have boats with different groups."

In The Caves Before The Shark Feed

Just a few hours before jumping into the ocean with Michael to feed sharks, Cristina and I don cave diving gear and head first to Ben's Cavern for a shakeout dive and then to Mermaid's Lair cave for a second dive.

It is remarkable to see Cristina move effortlessly from one environment to another, sometimes on a daily basis. Most cave divers I know plan a cave dive and that's pretty much it for the day. In Cristina's case, she may be running dive boats in the morning, and then blending gas, teaching someone about the intricacies of sharks later in the day and then head off to the caves for some exploration in the afternoon. It is a grueling schedule that may seem romantic but takes its toll nonetheless.

"If I don't have a shark dive or a cave dive and I go out on the boat with open water divers I have a blast," she says, revealing a passion for diving that goes beyond what most divers can claim.

As we gear up for the cave dives, we talk about Cristina's passion for diving. She exhibits a sense of modesty despite her accomplishments in so many facets of diving.

"Yeah, I don't excel at any of them," she tries to explain in talking about cave diving, for example, "I'm not Jill Heinerth, I'm fairly well-rounded, I'm a fairly decent cave diver. What is remarkable is, I can teach this broad spectrum of all these things."

Even as a shark feeding instructor, for which she is recognized world wide, her passion and modesty are on display, "Yeah, I excel at that," she quips, but adds, "I have no competition."

There is no doubt that Cristina can teach a broad spectrum, but her staff sees something in addition to her ability with students and accomplished divers as well. They see her ability with the sharks. As one staff member told me, "the sharks react differently when Cristina is there."

In the caves, it is clear that Cristina is equally at home in an overhead environment. She has explored the local caves and caverns for years. Her passion for the caves infects others with excitement. I will confess to a bias, my favorite dives are the first dive in a new cave system. And there is nothing like that first drop into a new cave. Diving with Cristina in Mermaid shows that her passion trumps her modesty –she is an excellent cave diver and as she tells me, she is not close to finished exploring this cave.

Back With The Sharks

The sharks are everywhere, swooping around the feeders with a retinue of other fish, including tuna and grouper. Nearby a Red Lionfish hovers; its calm demeanor masking its deadly rampage as an exotic invader. Cristina is very concerned about the damage the lionfish are doing but that is clearly not her focus at the moment.

She is allowing Michael to feed the hungry sharks, but staying close enough to help out if there is a problem. Shark feeding requires a smooth arm motion while striding back and forth along a specific area of the ocean floor. Eddy is snapping photos, sharks are diving in, grabbing a morsel of fish from Michael and swimming off.

The entire event is a beautiful pageant. I've seen in it many times and in never fails to transfix me. This particular time, I take make several swim overs so I can shoot directly above the feeding. It is dramatic and poetic all at the same time and the conductor is clearly Cristina.

On The Boat

Michael has completed his shark feeding course and is back on the boat, notably pleased and showing off where a shark nipped him through his chain mail glove.

The Sharksuits offer incredible protections, but when feeding, occasionally a shark's tooth will wedge slightly between the links and cause a small cut or scratch.

Cristina is clearly proud of Michael and his accomplishment. Michael looks equally proud and grateful for what Cristina has helped him do. Later he explains it to me like this, "the first time the shark bites your hand –Wow! I'm really feeding sharks."

Brenda makes it clear she would only allow her son to do this with Cristina. "I like how she handles herself," she says. Then she adds, "this is not just any dive student, this is my son, my baby."

Brenda runs a program in Henderson, North Carolina called Teem Ecco (www.team-ecco.com) that teaches marine awareness to young people (and any adults brave enough).

She once brought a group of 10 teenagers to UNEXSO to learn about diving, "it could be good and it could be bad – it was good," she says.

She talks about her first time meeting Cristina, "My husband and I did a shark dive a few years ago. She was the feeder, we just connected. She is probably one of the most prominent women in diving today and she is an unsung hero."

When I ask her to use one word to describe Cristina, the "P" word comes up again, as it does with so many people. "It's passion, and that is obvious with her."

The Future

Like all divers, Cristina has stories but unlike most divers she tells them with a dryness that increases their impact without being boastful. She admits she was initially a "zero to hero" cave diver and then relates how she trimmed the seals on her first dry suit and then did a full cave dive in the brand new dry suit –it was her first dry suit dive. She is also meticulous with the safety of her students, even if she took chances in her early days – something many of us can claim.

But that is all part of the package, all part of the passion. She has been on the front line of diving for 15 years. And that experience has had an impact.

"If I think about it, I was consumed by diving. When I dive, and it was time to go up I would be filled with dread, like I would never see the reef again," she says about her earlier years in the industry. Then she smiles and says she can occasionally give up a few shark dives these days.

Like so many dive professionals, she is concerned about the short term future of the industry because of the economy; but ultimately she is optimistic, especially when it comes to women in diving. She notes that with more women entering the sport, even greater numbers of women will realize they are good at it and begin diving in what has been a male dominated environment.

"What is fantastic about women diving –women do not have to be faster or stronger," she points out. "In diving, it is more of a mental thing. Women can excel as much as a man, if not more."

She would like to see UNEXSO expand into some technical diving, as a place where divers at all levels can come and do the type of diving they want to do.

"But divers are divers," she says, "they will go diving."

And that is her ultimate passion.

Jeff Toorish is the Chief Photojournalist for Advanced Diver Magazine and ADM E-zine. He is the President of the ADM Exploration Foundation. He lives in Maine with his family. You can read his dive column at www.clubmedinsider.com

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